



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hearing Statement of Intelligence & Counterterrorism Subcommittee Chairman Max Rose (D-NY)

Examining the Threat from ISIS and Al Qaeda

June 24, 2020

This hearing is being held amidst an ongoing global pandemic, the shifting of U.S. national security priorities, the resurgence of ISIS, and Al Qaeda's demonstrated endurance. Recent reporting has shown that the actions by international terrorist groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda remain a persistent and pervasive threat to U.S. interests abroad and the homeland.

This hearing will provide us with an opportunity to discuss the current threat picture from these groups, how they fit into our evolving national security challenges, and policy changes the federal government can take to effectively counter them as the government's attention is divided among competing priorities. Abroad and at home, ISIS and Al Qaeda continue to take advantage of vulnerable populations and distracted governments to spread their propaganda, recruit new members, and establish regional safe havens. It is also no surprise that these groups have capitalized on the instability caused by COVID-19. But this resurgence has not happened in a vacuum.

These groups continue to exploit the Administration's short-sightedness and lack of strategic thinking to regroup and reinvigorate their operations. In Iraq alone, attacks from ISIS have rebounded—even increased steadily since mid-2019. According to a recent report by the UN Security Council, the Taliban continues to back Al Qaeda in Afghanistan despite reaching an agreement with the Administration to draw down American troops.

Beyond the Middle East, ISIS and Al Qaeda affiliates have also been exerting influence and even competing for dominance in West Africa. Their territorial claims threaten the stability of important regional partners and the gains American diplomats, trainers, and advisors have made over the last decade to strengthen the rule of law and bolster economic development across the continent.

Diminishing the emphasis on dismantling terrorist networks in Africa will allow for safe havens to exist just as when Osama bin Laden operated Al Qaeda from Sudan in the 1990s. Additionally, I am deeply concerned that the Administration effectively abandoned the Kurds, our allies in the Middle East, last year, and temporarily paused U.S. counterterrorism operations in the region earlier this year.

Coalition building, effective diplomacy, and keeping our word — these are all pivotal to the disruption of worldwide terrorist threats. I fear these actions have hurt our Nation's standing around the world, sending a signal to our current and future allies that the United States will break its commitments when convenient. We must do better. That starts with reassessing threats to the homeland as they evolve around the world.

In March, ISIS prisoners in Syria rioted, and some appear to have even escaped, threatening our security and regional stability. In April, members of an ISIS cell in Germany were arrested after they planned to attack a U.S. Air Force base in the country.

In May, a Florida man was arrested who planned and attempted to carry out a mass shooting in the name of the Islamic State. Days later, the suspect's sister was shot dead after attempting to stab a local law enforcement officer. Just last month, the Department of Justice released information that determined the terror attack on the Pensacola military base in December was connected with an Al Qaeda affiliate group in Yemen.

Although Department officials stopped short of saying the Al Qaeda affiliate directed the attack, they admitted that the gunman coordinated with Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula by sharing "plans and tactics." We have since learned that gaps in our information sharing and vetting systems, as well a failure of current policies, resulted in the attack that took the lives of three U.S. sailors and injured eight other Americans.

Just a few days ago, the threat of jihadist terrorism and the threat of white supremacist terrorism intersected when we learned that a white supremacist U.S. Army Private shared classified information about overseas troop movements with Al Qaeda, admitting that his goal was to kill as many U.S. servicemembers as possible.

Nearly two decades after the September 11th attacks at home, we're at a crossroads in this rapidly changing security environment and need to seriously re-evaluate and update the American approach to combatting extremism. I look forward to a conversation discussing how the government can effectively prioritize this threat amid competing priorities.

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